THE WRITING PROCESS Revision: Peer Editing--Serving As a Reader

What does it take to be a helpful, supportive reader? Once you see what such a reader goes through, and serve as a reader and commentator yourself, perhaps you'll better appreciate any reactions you get to your own writing.

Begin your work as a peer editor by approaching your fellow writer's work in a friendly way. Remember, you aren't out to pass judgment on a peer's effort. Your purpose is to give honest, intelligent appreciation that helps the writer become aware of the essay's strong points, not only its weak ones. When you find fault, you can do so by making impartial observations-- statements that can benefit the writer. A judgmental way to criticize might be "This paper is confused. It keeps saying the same thing over and over again." But a more useful comment might be more specific: "Paragraph five makes the same point as paragraphs two and three" (which observation suggests that two of the three paragraphs might be eliminated).

Your job isn't merely to notice misspelled words or misused semi-colons (although it could become a part of the process). Your job is more extensive and should address larger issues: to what the writer is driving at, to the sequence of ideas, to the apparent truth or falsehood of the observations, to the quantity and quality of the evidence, to the coherence or unity of the paper as a whole.

The following checklist offers a variety of questions to guide you as a peer editor. Not all these points apply to every piece of writing, but many of them will be helpful in assisting the writer.

INITIAL QUESTIONS

What is my reaction to this paper?

What is the writer trying to tell me? What does he

or she most want me to learn?

What are this paper's greatest strengths?

Does it have any major weaknesses?

QUESTIONS ON MEANING

Do I understand everything? Is there any information missing from this draft that I still need to

know?

Is what this paper tells me worth saying, or does it only dwell on the obvious? Does it tell me

anything I didn't know before?

Is the writer trying to cover too much territory? Too little?

Does any point need to be more fully explained or illustrated?

When I come to the end, do I find the paper has promised me anything it hasn't delivered?

Could this paper use a down-to-the-ground revision? Would it benefit from a different topic

altogether--one the writer perhaps touches but doesn't deal with?

QUESTIONS ON ORGANIZATION

Has the writer began in such a way that I'm interested?

Am I quickly drawn into the paper's main idea? Or can I find, at some point later in the paper,

a better possible beginning?

Does the paper have one main idea, or does it struggle to handle more than one? Would the

main idea stand out better if anything were removed?

Might the ideas in the paper be more effectively rearranged in a different order? Do any ideas

belong together that now seem too far apart.

Does the writer keep to one point of view—one angle of seeing? (If he starts out writing as a

college student, does he switch to when he was a young boy without telling me?)

Does the ending seem deliberate, as if the writer meant to conclude at this point? Or does the

writer seem merely to have run out of gas? If so, what can the writer do to write a stronger

conclusion?

QUESTIONS ON LANGUAGE AND WRITING STRATEGIES

Do I feel this paper addresses a particular audience? Or does the writer appear to have no

idea whom she/he is speaking to?

At any point in the paper, do I find myself disliking or objecting to a statement the writer

makes, to a word or phrase with which I'm not in sympathy? Should this part be kept, whether

or not I object, or should it be changed?

Does the draft contain anything that distracts me, that seems unnecessary, that might be

struck?

Do I get bored at any point and want to tune out?

What might the writer do to make me want to keep reading?

Can I follow the writer's ideas easily? Does the paper need transitions (words and phrases that

connect), and if it does, at what places?

Does the language of this paper stay up in the clouds of generality, referring always to

agricultural commodities and legality, never to pigs' feet and parking tickets? If so, where and

how might the writer come down to earth and get specific?

Do I understand all the words the writer uses, or are there any specialized words (such as

scientific words or dialect) whose meaning needs to be made clearer?

FINAL QUESTION

Now that I have lived with this paper for a while and looked at it closely, how well does it work

for me?

GUIDELINES FOR WRITING COMMENTS AS A PEER EDITOR

To show the writer just where you had a reaction, write comments on the margin of the paper. Then at the end write an overall comment that includes the paper's strong and weak points. Remember, vague blame or vague praise won't help the writer. Don't say, "I like this essay because I can relate to it." It is true that such a response might be satisfying to the writer; however, expressing a comment such as "That example in paragraph nine clarified the whole point of the paper for me" might make the writer satisfied for a good reason.